



WASHINGTON STATE Board of Health

ALWAYS WORKING FOR A SAFER AND HEALTHIER WASHINGTON

DATE: November 14, 2012

TO: Washington State Board of Health Members

FROM: Don Oliver, SBOH Environmental Health Committee

SUBJECT: BRIEFING – CENTRAL WASHINGTON WILDFIRES

Background and Summary:

Beginning the second week of September and lasting into October this year, areas of Central Washington were blanketed with smoke from numerous wildfires. The worst impact was from a group of fires called the Wenatchee complex. Fires reached into the outskirts of Wenatchee. The Wenatchee-Cashmere area had the highest prolonged smoke pollution measured in the state since monitoring began in the 1980s. Lesser levels affected a wide area of Central and Eastern Washington and could, occasionally, be noticed in Western Washington. Also, parts of Southeastern Washington had smoke from wildfires burning in Idaho. Particulates in the smoke were the main cause of concern for widespread health effects. The smaller particles, PM_{2.5}, can reach deep into the lungs and present serious health hazards to people, especially those with underlying lung or cardiovascular conditions. This year's wildfires may foreshadow the future. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency predicts there is an increased risk of wildfires in the Northwest due to climate change. A history of forest fire suppression also might be increasing risk.

I commented at the October Board meeting about my perspective on the wildfires. There was a tremendous effort to control the fires by federal, state, and local fire agencies from around the country. Local health agencies devoted major staff time to the event. The Departments of Ecology and Health helped local agencies monitor the potential health hazards and advise the public. The Department of Health released more than 50,000 N-95 masks from the strategic stockpile to local health, emergency management, and tribal agencies for distribution to particulate-sensitive individuals who requested them. Chelan-Douglas Health District helped open a shelter for smoke-sensitive individuals in Waterville, on the plateau above the smoke. The Department of Social and Health Services furnished air cleaning equipment for the shelter. However, no one came to use it.

It was very encouraging that community members pulled together. There was no panic. The Red Cross, churches, and other community organizations responded. Even restaurant and hotel operators opened their doors for those displaced by the fires.

Matthew Kadlec, PhD, DABT, from the Department of Ecology's Air Quality Program, and Judy Bardin, ScD, from the Department of Health's Environmental Epidemiology Section, are here today to brief the Board on the extent of the air quality concerns raised by the Central Washington wildfires. Their presentations may be found under Tab 11 in Board members' packets.

Recommended Board Action:

None.

Staff Contact:

Ned Therien
